Review of the Arts

Tom Wolfe

Poor Tom, trivial Tom and a writer named Wolfe or a story about just what is happening with a fellow that has been selling books to someone and that someone might be you so I thought I'd run through them all so maybe you won't have to—plus a few thoughts on the state of America free of charge and maybe a question at the end about whether or not life is worth living so that maybe you won't have to ask even though the answer is in your hands . . .

. . . Anyway, the first time I read Tom Wolfe was back in 1965. Really, I first read about him. It was in **Time**, or maybe it was **Nesweek**. Those two magazines seem completely similar as they get lost in the chiffon cloud of my memory. Content (by that I mean slant) doesn't, from this far ridge of time, seem distinguishable. Form does seem so and both **Time** and **Newsweek** seem the same in form—layout, print have constsnt similarity like myriad of faded photographs of people long since forgotten.

Anyway, there was Tom, rakish, hand-on-the-hip (hip hip) Tom. Smirk-for-a-smile Tom perusing one of his own drawings looking as if he was a Welsh highlander staring down to the bowl of his pipe or a squat young Ben Franklin first trying out newly-invented spectacles (news photos wreak!).

The article was a review of this fan-fan-fantastic new book called **The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby**. The author was the hip voyeur in the accompanying photograph.

Custom cars

I read on with innocent eyes. Hip, swiging author . . . All-night rock blaring in the background while he writes . . . Sharp-shootin' Tom armed with an American Studies Ph.D. in one hand and in the other a style (man, style!) that went rat-ta-ta-tat, bouncing plastic pellets off everyone's forehead . . . a genius, a sheer genius, wowie! . . . Custom cars . . .

That was far enough—far freaking out! Tom would say. Custom cars! That was enough. I had to buy that book. Custom cars! I had to venture out of my world of paperbacks. I had to have this book and I had to have it hard-bound. Yes, hard-bound. I was so misguided.

It was the custom cars. I was fascinated by the custom cars, but maybe I should qualify that—I was fascinated by Revell's put-it-all-together-yourself-just-as-you-want-it custom car models. I had to have that book. It was the real thing. I even had trouble putting the models together (too much glue—lumpy customizing) but this book was the real thing.

Real thing

As my fat-American-affluence hand extended $5.50 to the old saleslady at the PBS&W store in Prescott, Arizona, and I left with the real thing. Tom Wolfe was a custom car.

There was a consumer revolution going on in America and the little old saleslady didn't even know it and she sold it to me. (Later at that same store I would buy Susan Sontag's **Against Interpretation** on sale for a quarter—which says more about small town America than it does about Susan Sontag.)

Then I read Tom's book and I wondered what was the difference between Tom Wolfe and custom cars. In that distant chiffon cloud of memory they both seemed baroque—all technique and no content.

So then I forgot Tom.

But he popped up again every so often. I heard he was in trouble with the **New Yorker**. Poor Tom took on the literary scion of the establishment and urbanity on 43rd Street got upset. Seems Tom moved some of the furniture around in James Thurber's office or something.

Then Tom brought out two books on the same "too-o-o-o-o-o freaking much!" (if we can quote the New York Times) day—**The Pump House Gang** and **The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test**.

This was

Illusion

This was in late 1968 (I picked up a copy of **The Pump House Gang** in January, 1969).

A lot had happened in those years since his first book. But poor Tom's latest almanac seemed much like poor Tom's first almanac. Reading Wolfe's first and second book seemed like shifting from Jan and Dean to the Beach Boys, a shift from Little Deuce Coupe to Surfin' U.S.A.

But after rereading—dig it—Wolfe proved to be as elusive as a Dylan lyric. Just what is he saying?

There seemed to be two sides to Wolfe. First, the pen side that veritably squealed from the page: Entertain! Entertain! Entertain! And second, the sword side that seemed to scream: just what the hell is all this anyway?

Different America

What he presented in Kandy-Kolored was a different American world than anyone else was giving readers. Most non-fiction writers were talking about Washington or Moscow or even vague places like New Delhi or Saigon. Other writers were concerned with how long could the Yankees-Celtics-Packers go on winning. Others were giving the latest statistics on iron ore output, oil depletion, whopper plastics. Others brought statistics on who was marrying or divorcing whom. Wolfe started putting it all together and calling it a new, real, American culture.

The people were not politicians; they were disc jockeys and record producers. The iron ore, oil depletion and whopper plastics became strange new cars built, not square Mondrian, but rather abstract, streamline baroque by men who were self-taught engineers with the touch of scuptors. They were the people, Wolfe was saying who were taking an oblique blob of affluence and molding it into a wide grassroots American culture. We didn't build all those asphalt rivers for nuttin' baby.

The American cultural heroes became stock car racers and an up-and-coming loud-mouth named Cassius Clay. Society was sliding away from debutante balls to Baby Jane Holzer at a Stones concert.

Innocent

But it was really only the chronicling of happenings. Kandy-Kolored presented really only an innocent saga of how Americans were entertaining themselves. It was as innocent as my young eyes when I first read about them. We even had a demolition derby in my small town America. Wolfe was right. This was Saturday Evening Post America all done up in chaos and violence and sealed in by plastic. And so, so entertaining.

But things changed right after 1965. Our culture turned on us. The Beatles suddenly became "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely-Hearts Club Band." They weren't singing "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" anymore. They were singing "Elinor Rigby," "Fool on the Hill," and strange songs like "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." The up-and-coming loud-mouth Cassius Clay had arrived and was calling himself Muhammad Ali. Saigon was no longer a vague place—violence started melting through the plastic. We were shifting from wondering what to do with our blob of affluence to a strident political consciousness. Kids were no longer dragging up and down main streets all around the country but were drifting off to strange places like San Francisco and then to Chicago. It wasn't an America of speeding tickets anymore but one of tear gas canisters and clubs.

Then with the **Pump House Gang**, there emerged a dark, darker side to Tom Wolfe.

We could still ask: What is he really saying? Just as we always seem to ask that question of Dylan. Wolfe seemed to start viewing the country with a cocked head. Was that cynicism that popped off of his pages? Wait a minute, folks, just what the hell is all this anyway?

Still the entertainment: could we enjoy all this?

"Tom"

Let Tom speak:

What struck me throughout America and England was that so many people have found such novel ways of doing just that, enjoying, extending their egos way out on the best terms available, namely their own. It is curious how many serious thinkers—and politicians—resist this rather obvious fact. Sheer ego extension—especially if attempted by all those rancid proles and suburban petty burghers—is a perplexing prospect. Even scary, one might say. Intellectuals and politicians currently exhibit a vast gummy nostalgia for the old restraints, the old limits, of the ancient ego-crusher: **Calamity**. Historically, calamity has been the one serious concern of serious people. War, pestilence—Apocalypse! I was impressed by the profound relief with which intellectuals and politicians discovered poverty in 1963, courtesy of Michael Harrington's book **The Other America**. And, as I say, it was **discovered**. Eureka! We have found it again! We thought we had lost it. That was the spirit of enterprise. When the race riots erupted—and when the war in Vietnam grew into a good-sized hell—intellectuals welcomed all that with a ghastly embrace too. War! Poverty! Insurrection! Alienation! O Four Horsemen, you have not deserted us entirely. The game can go on.

One night, in the very middle of the period when I was writing these stories, I put on my electric-blue suit—it is truly electric blue—and took part in a symposium at Princeton with Gunter

Continued on Page 8